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THE HOMECOMING

NASA's two stuck astronauts are headed back to Earth on Tuesday to close out a dramatic marathon mission that began with a bungled Boeing test flight more than nine months ago

Butch Wilmore and Indian-origin Sunita Williams bid farewell to the International Space Station, 'their home since last spring' departing aboard a SpaceX capsule alongside two other astronauts

The mission took an unexpected turn in January when Trump asked SpaceX founder Elon Musk to accelerate their return

The capsule undocked shortly after 10.30 am IST and aimed for a splashdown off the Florida coast five hours later | P12

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HOPE AND DESPAIR

What's happening in Ukraine is not good, but we're going to see if we can work a peace agreement, a ceasefire and peace. And I think we'll be able to do it

US President Donald Trump

Even if the other side makes a gesture of some sort... you can expect them to find another way or putting pressure or putting a spoke in our wheel

Russian President Vladimir Putin

Russia agrees to pause strike on Ukraine targets

JAYANTH JACOB @ New Delhi

RUSSIAN President Vladimir Putin on Monday agreed to stop striking energy targets in Ukraine for 30 days, Kremlin said. The commitment came during an extensive discussion over phone with US President Donald Trump. However, there was no agreement on a full-scale ceasefire as Putin set some conditions for the same.

"President Trump and President Putin spoke about the need for peace and a ceasefire in the Ukraine war. Both leaders agreed this conflict needs to end with a lasting peace. They also stressed the need for improved bilateral relations between the United States and Russia. The blood and treasure that both Ukraine and Russia have been spending in this war would be better spent on the needs of their people," a White House statement read.

It added that the two leaders agreed the movement to peace will begin with energy and infrastructure ceasefire, as well as technical negotiations on implementation of a maritime ceasefire in the Black Sea, full ceasefire and permanent peace. "These negotiations will begin immediately in the Middle East," the statement read.

Trump and Putin also agreed that a future with an improved bilateral relationship between the US and Russia has huge upside, the statement added.

The talks lasted for over two hours, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

This is the second time Trump and Putin have spoken over the phone since the former took office in January.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha said in New Delhi that Kyiv would not be an obstacle for a peace deal with Russia. Ukraine is waiting for clarity to emerge on the peace process after the conversation between Trump and Putin, he added.

Earlier in the day, Trump said he expected to discuss with Putin 'land and power plants' that have been seized during the grinding three-year war.

However, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's aide Andriy Yermak said Kyiv "will never recognise any occupied territory as Russian".

In preparation for the Trump-Putin call, White House special envoy Steve Witkoff met last week with Putin in Moscow, while Rubio persuaded Ukraine to agree to the ceasefire deal.

Putin earlier said he agreed in principle with the US proposal, but sought guarantees on Ukraine's actions.

US President Donald Trump and Russia's President Vladimir Putin (File photos) | AFP

An injured man being taken to the Al-Ahli hospital following overnight airstrikes by Israel across the Gaza Strip | AP

Ceasefire in the bin as Israeli airstrikes kill over 400 in Gaza

AGENCIES @ Gaza Strip

ISRAEL launched airstrikes across the Gaza Strip early Tuesday killing at least 413 Palestinians, mostly women and children, and shattered a ceasefire in place since January with its deadliest bombardment in a 17-month asymmetrical war with Hamas.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered the strikes after Hamas refused Israeli demands to change the ceasefire agreement. Officials said the operation was open-ended and was expected to expand. The Israeli military ordered people to evacuate eastern Gaza, including much of the northern town of Beit Hanoun and other communities further south, and head toward the centre of the territory, indicating that Israel could soon renew ground operations. "Israel will, from now on, act against Hamas with increasing military strength," it said.

Hamas calls out the US

Hamas leader Sami Abu Zuhri told AFP the strikes were an attempt to force the group's "surrender", and called the United States "complicit" in the escalation

The attack during Ramzan could signal the full resumption of a war that has already killed tens of thousands across Gaza. It also raised concerns about the fate of two dozen Israeli hostages held by Hamas believed to still be alive. After two months of calm, stunned Palestinians found themselves once again digging loved ones out of rubble and holding funeral prayers at morgues. "Nobody wants to fight," Palestinian Nidal Alzaanin said.

Gaza war mediator Qatar denounced Israel's onslaught. It warned that the attack will ignite the region. Hamas said the head of its government in Gaza, Essam al-Dalis, was among top officials killed in the strikes, along with interior ministry head Mahmud Abu Watfa and Bahjat Abu Sultan, Gaza's internal security chief.

The White House said it had been consulted and voiced support for Israel's actions. US President Donald Trump and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin said Iran should never be in a position to destroy Israel.

4% quota for minorities: Bill tabled in House, BJP opposes it

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ Bengaluru

KARNATAKA Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister HK Patil on Tuesday tabled the Karnataka Transparency in Public Procurements (Amendment) Bill, 2025, in the Assembly to provide 4% reservation for people, including Muslims and other minorities, under Category 2B of Backward Classes while awarding government contracts for civil works.

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah had announced this reservation in the state budget amid objections by Opposition parties, which termed it appeasement politics.

The Bill states that it is necessary to amend the KTPP Act, 1999, to give effect to the proposals made in the budget for 2025-26 with a view to overcoming the unemployment problem. This reservation is being provided to overcome the unemployment problem among the Backward Classes and to encourage their participation in government civil works. It allows 4% reservation in contracts for those from Backward Classes (2B) in civil works worth up to Rs 2 crore and service contracts worth up to Rs 1 crore. P4

A democratic country must not function like a police state: SC

SUCHITRA KALYAN MOHANTY
@ New Delhi

EXPRESSING dismay over the habit of trial courts and high courts denying bail in minor cases despite completion of investigation, the Supreme Court said that the practice is unacceptable in a democratic country and that it creates unnecessary strain on the higher judiciary.

"A democratic country must not function like a police state, where law enforcement agencies exercise arbitrary powers to detain individuals without genuine necessity," a bench of justices Abhay S Oka and Ujjal Bhuyan said on Monday while granting bail to an accused who had been in custody for over two years in a cheating case.

The accused had moved the top court after his bail plea was mechanically rejected by both the trial court and the Gujarat High Court, despite the investigation being completed and a chargesheet filed.

The Supreme Court has time and again held that bail, not jail, is the rule.

Questioning the repeated rejection of bail pleas by lower courts, the SC observed that two decades ago, bail pleas in smaller cases rarely reached the high courts, let alone the apex court. Now, bail matters that should have been disposed of by magistrates are being brought before the SC, it said.

"It is shocking that the Supreme Court is adjudicating bail pleas in cases that should be disposed of at the trial court level. The system is being burdened unnecessarily," Justice Oka said.

Bail, not jail, is the norm

The Supreme Court has on numerous times urged lower courts to adopt a more liberal stance in granting bail, particularly in cases of minor infractions

Bail matters in cases triable by magistrates are being brought before the SC... People are not getting bail when they should

Justice Abhay Oka

EXPRESS READ

Telangana Assembly passes SC categorisation Bill

Hyderabad: The Telangana Assembly on Tuesday passed The Telangana SCs (Rationalisation of Reservations) Bill, 2025. The bill sub-categorises the constitutionally mandated 15% reservations for SCs by classifying 59 subcastes into three groups—Group 1, 2 & 3—allocating 1%, 9%, and 5% reservations, respectively | P5

Kannada Okkoota calls for Karnataka bandh on March 22

Bengaluru: Kannada Okkoota, an umbrella organisation of Kannada groups, confirmed on Tuesday that the Karnataka bandh will be observed on Saturday. The bandh has been called to condemn the alleged oppression of Kannadigas in Belagavi and the assault on a state-run bus conductor for not speaking Marathi | P5

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